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MR. HALLS

SERMON

ON THE

GOSPEL CREDIBILITY.



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The Gospel Credibility defended against the Ob-
jection of its Decrease by Length of Time.

I N A
S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,
AT ST. MARYS CHURCH,
ON SUNDAY, JULY IV. MDCCLVI.

BY CHARLES HALL B.D. FELLOW OF
C.C.C. AND ONE OF HIS MAJESTYS
PREACHERS AT WHITEHALL.

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MATTHEW 28. 20.

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ALWAY EVEN UNTO THE
END OF THE WORLD.

THESE Words in their primary sense express the gracious Promise, which Christ gave just before his Ascension into Heaven, That He would for ever continue to accompany and assist his faithful Disciples and their future Successors, in advancing the Work of the Ministry. But they may in a more general View be not improperly or unfairly extended to denote the Perpetuity of the Evidences of his Religion; and to intimate, That Mankind in all future Generations and periods of the World should never be left destitute of sufficient means of knowing, and satisfactory grounds for embracing, the Truth of the Gospel.

Yet the Enemies of Christianity, in direct contradiction to this, represent it as absurd to suppose, that the Credit of any Revealed Religion

gion can be perpetual or even lasting for any considerable space of Time. For every external Revelation being, they say, built upon Facts as its Groundwork and Basis, The truth of such facts must continually become less and less credible; and this from the very Nature of Testimony, and the fate which necessarily attends the Conveyance of it: since Experience assures us, that Facts of every kind and of what moment or importance soever, which pass successively thro' several hands, are at each step so much alter'd, misrepresented, and disguised from a variety of Causes, that it becomes next to impossible at any distance of time to discover the genuine features of truth, or to know with certainty the Original State of the case. And this Observation they think applicable to all written History, sacred as well as profane; the transmission of it to remoter times being in like manner attended with numberless depravations, which at every remove both violate its purity and impair its Credit. The Decrease of which is therefore regular, and proportionable to the Length of time elapsed, and is even capable of being determined by exact calculation. The Inference from the whole is this, that the Evidence for the truth of Christianity is in the present Age extremely faded and weak, and must
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continue to wear away by insensible degrees, till at length it be utterly extinguished and lost.

One cannot help reflecting, at the first View of this Objection, upon the inconsistency which reigns among the several Schemes of Infidelity. At one time the Late Season of the publication of the Gospel is urged as an Argument against it, and at another its very Antiquity is thought a Just reason for disbelieving it. If in the Opinion of some it is too Recent a discovery to be the Gift of an all-gracious and merciful God, it is in the Judgment of others already too Ancient to be admitted as credible by Man. So perfectly alike are the present Adversaries of the Christian Religion and the first Enemies of the person of Christ, who, "though they brought many false Witnesses against him," yet their Accusations "agreed not together."

It may be further observed, that If this Position is Just, it must seem impossible for the Almighty to deliver any standing Revelation for the perpetual instruction of Mankind. For "whether the Doctrine come from God, or "whether it be of Man," it must according to this supposition in a course of Ages "alike come "to nought:" Unless indeed the mouldering Fabric should be continually repaired, and miraculously supported from time to time by fresh

interpositions of Divine Power. And this must cause the same impossibility to recur, since Miracles so frequently repeated must at length lose both their Nature and Name, and become unfit Proofs of any Extraordinary Revelation at all.

But to consider a little both the justness and the extent of the Position itself. And here it must appear manifestly wrong to lay down this or indeed any General, Abstract Rule as holding uniformly and regularly in all cases of Testimony, which are of so mixed and complex a Nature, and which depend upon and are distinguished by, such an almost infinite variety of circumstances. — Or should it for the most part hold good, yet it can be properly applied in no larger extent than the foundation on which it rests will warrant; and this in the present case is the observed Decrease of certainty in the propagation of popular and ordinary Reports: But can any just inference be made from Oral Testimony, which is loose, unconnected, and broken at every step of its progress, and thereby gives free scope for every possible motive to operate, by which the Truth of any Fact may gradually suffer; can any Just Conclusion, I say, be made from so irregular a channel of Information as this, to the case of Litterary Records; in which every thing is fixed and permanent,
and

and which from several considerations that might be insisted on, contain just as full security against this progressive departure from truth, as the other affords ample opportunities for it. — Or if somewhat like this were in general granted even of written Tradition, yet, unless it were strictly necessary and unavoidable in the Nature of things, many particular Histories may be so circumstanced as to be entirely exempted from it. And it is certain, that each of them has a right to be considered by itself, to have the merits of its own Evidence examined apart, and to be judged by the weight of those peculiar circumstances which belong to its own Conveyance. — Or to make yet further concessions, should it be allowed that the Credit of all other ancient Histories whatever might be affected by the influence of this principle, it would nevertheless be quite foreign and impertinent in the present instance of the Gospel Records. For these claim to have been “given by the Inspiration of God,” and at the same time to contain Truths of the most interesting nature to Mankind, no less than “the Words of eternal Life” and Happiness. And therefore till this Claim is invalidated by other and stronger arguments than have hitherto been brought against it, it is most reasonable to suppose, not only that an extraordinary

nary care of Men would be exerted in their preservation, but that the Providence of God would, as oft as Occasion required, immediately interpose to secure them from all Injuries either Casual or Wilful: Notwithstanding the Relations of ordinary matters, derived from a Source and intrusted to a Custody merely Human, might thro' length of time be liable to a gradual decay and at last a total loss of Credit.

But, not to dwell any longer on the General consideration of this Principle, I shall endeavour in this discourse to shew the falshood of it as applied to the Historical and other Evidences of the Christian Religion. And this by an Appeal to Experience and Fact; from which it may appear, that the Force of this Evidence is not in any respect considerably diminished, and in some is greatly augmented and improved.

And first, The Credibility of the Gospel History must, it is pretended, labour at present under great disadvantages and strong suspicions, when we look back on the numerous Ages past since its first publication, and reflect on the many Corruptions, Changes and Forgeries which it is natural to think would happen in most, and which it is well known were actually put in practice in some periods of its Passage. Nor is this Fact altogether to be denied; unwarrantable
liberties

liberties were taken by wicked and ill-disposed
 Men in some of the earlier Ages, in attempting
 both to obtrude forged Gospels upon the World,
 and to adulterate the True. But the Infidel
 grounds his mistrusts on a part only of the real
 matter of Fact, which a view of the whole
 might easily remove. For to whom is it we are
 indebted for the knowledge of those fraudulent
 proceedings? Not to the Enemies but the Pri-
 mitive defenders of Christianity; who, wanting
 neither a due veneration for the lively Oracles of
 God, nor abilities and means of every kind to
 ascertain their authority, took care to guard them
 from all foreign mixture with the most scrupu-
 lous attention. And it was with this view, that
 as they publicly exposed every such corrupt or
 spurious Production for the satisfaction of their
 own times, so they recorded and specified it in
 their writings for the Information and direction
 of Posterity. If therefore it be certain, that At-
 tempts were ever made to falsify the sacred writ-
 ings, it is not less certain that they were imme-
 diately detected and frustrated. The Evidence
 which subsists at present concerning this their
 detection rests precisely upon the same authority,
 as does that of their Existence. And therefore
 the genuine and truly inspired Gospels still re-
 main unsullied in their Credit, so far as any ac-
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tual endeavours to the contrary may be thought to affect it. And such as are imaginary and barely supposed, deserve not the least regard.

It is indeed true, that the Relative Credibility, or the satisfaction which an inquisitive Christian might receive concerning the authority of the Holy Scriptures, has not been in all Ages the same. This is more eminently observable of that long Night of Superstition and Ignorance, when not only the Worship and the Doctrines of Christianity were grossly corrupted, but the Scriptural Evidence of its truth was in a great degree obscured and diminished. Indeed, while the Spiritual Leaders of those times had recourse to almost any other supports of the Christian Faith, rather than the written Word of God, which they industriously represented both as precarious and insufficient, it was scarce to be expected that they should be very solicitous to keep alive and strengthen the proper Grounds of its Authority. At the same time the General decay, if not total Extinction of Learning among them, utterly disabled them from doing it, if they had been ever so strongly disposed to it. The Proofs however and the several Marks both of the genuineness and purity of the Everlasting Gospel still subsisted in the midst of this darkness, while they lay either quite unheeded or

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but little understood, waiting only for a more favourable season to bring them forth in their native Lustre and full strength.

And this Opportunity was, by the blessing of God, afforded by the Reformation. For since this Period every false and doubtful Principle of Faith being discarded and the sacred writings adhered to as the only unerring standard of Righteousness, These Writings have been brought to the Test, accurately examined, and successfully ascertained. The particular proofs indeed of their authenticity which have arisen in the progress of this Enquiry, are not less Recent than they are Various and decisive. Thus the Argument taken from the exact agreement of all the manuscripts of the New Testament, of whatever Age and wherever found, was before unthought of, while those manuscripts lay buried in their separate recesses and dispersed in the distant regions of the World. It was from the Juxtaposition, and the diligent Comparison of them, and the faithful Notation of their minutest differences, that the Proof resulted: And it was a Proof of a Growing Nature; gathering new strength as fast as fresh Copies appeared and increasing its Validity in proportion to their Variety and Number. The same Reflexion will hold good of most, if not of all the external Rules,

by which the purity of the Evangelic History is supported: The uniform appearance of all the Versions of it in every different Language, The concurrence of the large Citations from it in the earliest Christian Writers, and the Confirmation given to it both by Jewish and Pagan Contemporaries; These and the like evidences were in a manner brought to light, when those Languages were revived, and the study of them came to be generally promoted and eagerly pursued, and when the learned treasures of Antiquity were minutely canvassed, with a view chiefly to obtain and to give satisfaction in this particular point.

In a word, the Credibility of the New Testament, as a true and Authentic Memorial of the Facts and Doctrines of the Christian Religion has by the industry and zeal of these latter Ages been established to a degree not only greatly superior to what it continued to be for many preceding Centuries, but nearly equal to its condition in the earliest Ages of the Church.

And this advantageous state of the Historical Evidence of our Religion, as it is in a great measure owing to the Revival of Litterature and to some particular discoveries which facilitated its progress, so more especially to one particular branch of it, which was hardly known or but superficially cultivated in any preceding Age; I

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mean, Critical Learning: Not barely that confined species, which is employed in the examination of Verbal matters, but the more enlarged and extensive exercise of it: which, when supported by a general knowledge of the several languages of Antiquity, and an acquaintance with the Genius, Customs and transactions of past Ages, is, and hath in fact proved, the most useful Instrument of ascertaining the genuineness of all ancient Writings. It hath established such sound Rules and indubitable Marks, drawn from those Sources and built on the Nature and Reason of things, as will serve to guide us almost with certainty in distinguishing the real books of inspired Scripture from any of the spurious imitations of it. It hath deduced the Conveyance of them down from the times of the Apostles to our own, marked the several Removes, shewn those Removes to have been in fact but few, and at each step demonstrated the Identity of the Gospels then in Use with those of which we are possessed at this Day. And it will in general, when applied to the sacred Books with that sobriety, discretion, and deference, which both the importance of the Matter they contain and the dignity of their Original require, contribute most effectually to illustrate as well as to guard and transmit them safe and uncorrupt to the latest Generations.

So far then is that confident Assertion from being true, that the Resurrection of Letters has been fatal to the Cause of Christianity, ever since which period it has been in its Decay — that this very Circumstance hath been chiefly instrumental in establishing the primary and Capital support of it, its Historical Evidence. Fatal indeed it was to the depraved System of Popery, and to the many gross corruptions and false principles thereby introduced, which had long disfigured the genuine purity of Religion and weakened its Credit. But to the cause of pure and undefiled Christianity it was in the highest degree beneficial and salutary; restoring the Credibility of it to its ancient Lustre, replacing it on its only proper foundation, and giving to that foundation additional measures of strength and stability.

And so far is this notion of a progressive and regular diminution of the Credit of all Historical Relations, in proportion to the number of Ages thro' which they are conveyed, from being Just, that it appears to be altogether groundless and chimerical. The comparison of the state of the Scripture Records in the present and in different periods of past Ages, affords not barely an Exception but a direct confutation of the Rule. And in truth this Decrease, so often

as it actually happens, is owing immediately and properly to quite other Causes than distance or Length of Time, to a Spirit of Fraud which contrives and propagates forgeries, — of Laziness and supine indifference which suffers valuable memorials to perish, — of Credulity which embraces Truth and fiction indiscriminately, — and of Ignorance, alike unable to apply the means of ascertaining the one, or of detecting the other. Time is no otherwise concerned in the Effect than by Accident. Those real Causes may take place in the shortest space of time, and may not in the longest, just as the peculiar circumstances, disposition, and leading principles of each succeeding Age happen to promote or discourage their prevalence and Operation. But to suppose in general, that either Religious or indeed any History, must from some inherent and necessary efficiency of Time as such, suffer a sensible and constant abatement of its truth, and sink continually from one degree of uncertainty to a greater, is as little conformable to Fact and Experience, as it is ill supported by the Reason of the Thing itself.

From this view of the Authenticity of the Gospel History, I proceed, Secondly, to the Miraculous Facts therein recorded, and to enquire, what appearances of Decrease are to be found in

in regard to this essential evidence of the Christian Revelation. And now, if the Evangelic History is really placed in such advantageous circumstances of credibility, and so far removed from defect or decay, the similar state of the Miracles related therein, must be included in it and follow by necessary consequence. For all those Arguments usually taken from the personal character, circumstances, and situation of the Witnesses, the allegation of which might otherwise have been precluded, will now, when the History itself of which they make a part, is cleared from all doubt and suspicion, be urged with the utmost propriety and conclusiveness of strict reasoning. Indeed, after this Point is once clearly established, the weight of their Testimony must in this or in any Age howsoever remote, in which it is so established, be precisely the same as it was even in Times the nearest to that of the Transactions themselves.

But tho' the Truth of all traditional Miracles, rests immediately and properly on Testimony, and that of the Scriptural in particular is confirmed in an extraordinary manner by this single evidence, yet there may be other circumstances which may give both to the Reality of such Facts and to the Veracity of the Records themselves, an high additional degree of Credit. And these

these Circumstances may be more perfectly understood, if not discovered and brought to light, in Ages the most remote from that of the Events confirmed by them. If the Gospel Miracles had been permanent in their Natural Effects, as indeed they were only Temporary, some lasting Vestiges of them would no doubt have still continued. For this is evidently the case of many of the Wonders of the Old Testament. Thus the accurate researches made by later Ages in Natural History, into the present state of the Earth and the peculiar Situation of many Marine Bodies found in it, have brought forth Appearances to our View, which are obviously accountable from and indeed quite inexplicable on any other supposition, than that of the Truth of the earliest Miracle in Scripture, the Universal Deluge. In the same manner many visible and striking signatures of other supernatural interpositions of the Almighty related in Holy Writ, have been discovered upon a careful survey of those places, in which his Wonderful works were displayed. Not however, that the Belief of those great Events is to be directly grounded on such Appearances, but that they may be considered as strong Collateral Evidences in support of their Truth; distinct from that of the Written Testimony, which they both confirm and illustrate

illustrate in many particulars, and, being yet visible to our Senses, obviate at once this notion of the present decay of its credibility. Indeed the Use they are of in respect to Sacred History is much the same with that of Inscriptions, Coins, and other surviving Monuments of Classical Antiquity in regard to Profane. Both alike strengthen the general Credit of the ancient Writers with whom they are respectively connected, and evince the certainty as well as determine the circumstances of many illustrious and important events. And though no traces of a Physical Nature are now extant to confirm the Miracles of Christ and his Apostles, yet there is One not less certain and conclusive in favour of their Reality; I mean the Existence of Christianity itself, which considering the almost unsurmountable obstacles of every kind that can possibly be conceived, which lay in the way of its Progress, if the Extraordinary Facts on which it was built were all the while Fictitious and unreal, must itself be looked upon as the greatest Miracle that ever existed in the World.

If then the Wondrous Works of our Lord have still an unimpaired title to their admission as Real Facts, something yet more positive may be advanced in respect to their Validity as Proofs of a Commission from Heaven. Many of the
Jews,

Jews, even while our Saviour manifested his Signs and Wonders daily before their Eyes, and appealed to his Works as proofs of his coming from God, saw not or at least acknowledged not the force of this Proof: Some resolving all his actions into the Power of the Prince of the Devils, and others in after-ages evaded it by yet more frivolous and improbable solutions. The Heathen World had in general a strong persuasion of the Powers of Magic, and had recourse to the influence of this Principle to account for every alarming performance, which they could not otherwise explain and the testimony of which they knew not how to invalidate. The Atheistic notions too of Some, and the unworthy conceptions which All of them entertained of God, either excluded his Agency entirely from all events whatsoever, or at least hindered them from seeing the necessary Connexion there must be between a Supernatural Act, and the exertion of his Almighty Power. This Ignorance of Nature, and of God, it is certain, for some time retarded the General Reception of the Gospel. But neither of these Causes at present subsists as a bar to the Credibility of the Christian Revelation as supported by Miraculous Evidence. For, as the improved insight into Nature, occasioned by the cultivation and advancement

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vancement of sound Philosophy, has exploded the unmeaning pretences of Sorcery and Magic, and afforded the means of distinguishing Real Miracles from the feats of Artifice or the Illusions of Craft, so the better knowlege of the supreme Being, introduced by pure Religion, directs us at once to refer every truly Miraculous Event to the Great Governour of all things: by whose Power alone as the course of Nature is incessantly conducted in every part, so by his immediate Act or exprefs appointment only can it be at any time interrupted or overruled. And therefore so far as both the Nature of a true Miracle, and the Conclusion to be drawn therefrom in favour of the Christian Revelation is more generally known and understood, this Age may be thought in this respect to have the advantage over every other which has preceded it.

The Evidence of Prophecy comes next under consideration, which affords yet more abundant confirmation of the Point I have been enlarging upon. For as a Series of ancient Predictions, gradually delivered, helped to keep alive in every Age the expectation of the coming of Christ, as well as to point him out upon his actual appearance, so a succession of Events, predicted by Christ and his Apostles, and gradually accomplished, served in like manner to confirm

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and strengthen in after-Ages the conviction of his being actually come forth from God. Of this kind are usually and justly reckoned, the Persecutions which his Disciples met with from the World — The false Christs and false Prophets which arose — The Heresies which sprang up like Tares and checked the growth of the Good Seed, and yet notwithstanding these and other obstacles, the amazing Progress and Propagation of the Gospel — The destruction of Jerusalem, and the total subversion both of the Polity and Religion of the Jewish People — And more particularly, the present dispersion of that Race over the face of the whole Earth — and above all, the encroachments and usurpation of the Papal power, with the corrupt and superstitious doctrines and lying Wonders of the “Great City which standeth upon seven Mountains:” Events, improbable at the time they were foretold, and which no Human Wisdom could foresee, or the then state of things afford the least ground for conceiving: But which have been as punctually and remarkably completed, as they were before minutely specified and described. Besides the General Proof which these Events give of the whole of Christianity, They in a particular manner establish both the authenticity and the inspiration of the Books in

which those Prophecies are contained ; and not less so the certainty of the Miracles therein recorded : since the performance of Works beyond the sphere of Human Power to effect, is not more supernatural, than the Prediction of events beyond the reach of Human knowlege to foresee. But what is most observable, is, that this accomplishment of the Prophecies of Christ took place successively, and at different intervals, and in Transactions many of which exist as a standing Proof to this Day. It is indeed an Evidence peculiar to the Ages which followed the declaration of the Gospel, and which rose by regular gradations to its present height of Validity, and is still going on from strength to strength by the succession of other Prophecies which hasten towards their Completion. And here not to insist on the helps which Science and Learning have afforded to the elucidating and setting this Prophetic Evidence in full Light, an obvious advantage arises from our being placed at a distance in order to the survey of it, to the taking a compleat View of all which preceded and followed, tracing the connexion, and forming an Idea of the uniform tendency, of every Part of it : which of course must render the whole more cogent and satisfactory, than when a single Part only is viewed separately from the rest.

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Upon the whole it appears, that the Author and Finisher of our Faith, hath in part already fulfilled, and we trust will fully accomplish his Promise of continuing with his true Disciples unto the End of the World. The Proofs given of his Divine Mission in his own Life-time were Public, Alarming, frequently repeated, and in the highest degree convincing. And least Generations to come might either be ignorant of those Original Grounds of conviction, or doubt their certainty if entrusted only to Oral Tradition, His Blessed Spirit was immediately present both in the compiling faithfully and in conveying down safely, the Authentic Charter of Human Salvation. Nor did he leave himself without further Witness, but imparted to After-Ages his "sure Word of Prophecy as a Light shining in a dark place." And tho' in some Periods he has judiciously permitted the Lustre of his Religion to be for a time obscured and impaired, yet afterwards he hath graciously been pleased to restore it in full measure "as at the beginning." Indeed whatever new or additional weight has been above supposed to be given to any of the Gospel Evidences either by the peculiar circumstances of later times, or by the improvement of Science and Literature, or by any other seemingly Human Causes, it is still properly to be considered

considered in the same Light, as the Consequence of the Promise and Result of the Providential goodness of the Almighty: who oftentimes employs the Natural Powers and Ordinary labours of Men as instruments in his hands for the advancement of his own Divine Purposes; who both directs and blesses their otherwise ineffectual endeavours; and who "though Paul planteth and Apollos watereth, alone giveth the Increase."

There is however an obvious Presumption which may be thought to lye against this account of the present state of the Gospel Credibility: namely the visible abatement of the Credit actually given to it, and the increase of Deists and Unbelievers in this beyond the example of former Ages. A Circumstance greatly to be lamented and which amidst such accumulated evidence is the more inexcusable: but which concludes not in the least against the Real condition and force of the Evidence itself, how strongly soever it may reflect on the perversity, the prejudices and the depravity of Men. Scepticism may, even amidst circumstances the most favourable to Truth, be wrought up in some minds to so extravagant an height, that no Force of Argument, no means of Conviction shall be able to subdue it. And Examples of this

this turn verify the observation of our blessed Lord, that "if they hearken not to Moses and the Prophets, neither would they be persuaded, tho' one rose from the Dead."

But tho' Infidelity has enlarged its borders, and propagated its pernicious tenets with more daring insolence, yet the Providence of God, which draws forth Good from Evil and maketh his Enemies instrumental to his Glory, hath rendered even this Circumstance beneficial to the Cause of his Religion. For as every single Proof of Revelation has been at times attacked and disputed, this gave occasion to a more diligent examination and more accurate discussion of those Proofs: which ended, not barely in the confutation of all Deistic cavils, but in the enlargement of Christian knowlege, and in the discovery of many important truths, which had otherwise lain neglected and concealed. And it is no more than justice to add, that since the Æra of Protestantism, this Nation and Church have produced Advocates for the Faith, who in point of extensive knowlege and masterly reasoning and in the actual services they have thereby performed, are to be paralleled only with the first Apologists of the Christian Cause.

The Application from what has been said will I conceive naturally be expected to turn upon

upon the subserviency of Learning to the Interests of Religion. For it has been shewn, that Each of the Primary Evidences of it have in fact received both Light and strength from the culture of useful knowlege, and in the absence of it have always proportionably suffered or been less understood. Nor is it indolently to be thought, that the truth of the Christian Dispensation is to be taken for granted; a principle, under which every false Religion might be sheltered as easily as the truest. It must indeed at all times be proved, in order to its gaining a satisfactory entrance into the mind and a steady influence over the Heart. And it must in this Age be defended, against Gainsayers not more prompted by malice, than prepared with talents, acquired as well as natural, to oppose it. But it would be an unpardonable presumption to attempt either the Proof or the Defence, without a competent Knowlege of ancient Languages, an acquaintance with the transactions and Usages of Antiquity, a skill in the received Rules of Criticism, not to mention an insight into the several branches of the Science of Nature.

But perhaps those parts of Learning, by which the external Proofs of Christianity may be enforced, will be more willingly admitted, while

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while the Speculative Sciences only are looked on with a suspicious Eye, as being unserviceable, if not detrimental, to the advancement of it. But it is to be remembered, that Infidelity is busied not barely in attacking the Pillars of our Faith, but in undermining it, in sapping it to the Root, by calling in question the Want of Revelation, the congruity of it to the Attributes of God, and the rectitude of its Contents. Is it therefore a desertion of our Post, to repel these attacks, to obviate the ill Impressions they might make, and to give Mankind that Satisfaction, which they have a Right to expect, and which the truth of the case will so manifestly bear? Is it of no Use, to prepossess men in favour of Revealed Religion, and to dispose them before-hand to listen more attentively to its other proofs, by representing the End of it as excellent and noble, worthy of the goodness of a Benevolent God, and suited to the exigencies and condition of weak and sinful Man? Is not the internal Evidence of the Gospel, though no direct proof of its being the actual Gift of Heaven, yet such a Presumption at least as is scarce possible to be resisted? And it is to the purpose of the present Subject to add, that from the Nature of the Materials of which it is composed, it must be necessarily perpetual, and there-

fore is of itself alone a sure Counterpoise to any supposed Decays, to which the Positive Evidences might by some Persons be thought subject. The Knowledge therefore of Moral Duties and that of Natural Religion, are jointly with the rest before recited, to be carefully cultivated, and may occasionally be well employed, in “the Work of the Ministry, for the edifying of “the Body of Christ.”

One cannot therefore observe without some surprize, the endeavours used to discourage the Improvement of our Natural Powers, by decrying this their most valuable exercise and application; nor hear without much contempt, the perpetual strains of flattery addressed to the Illiterate, and the low compliments bestowed upon Ignorance. If however the Rational method of supporting Christianity should be generally discarded and laid aside, and the connexion between sound Learning and true Religion dissolved, if in a word, the Spirit of Fanaticism, so anxiously propagated, should again revive and prevail; which indeed the better Judgment of these enlightened times, and the experience of the ill use ever made of this Spirit, give us but little reason to apprehend: Christianity may perhaps for a while be upheld, or rather the Appearance of it extorted, by Power, or the flights of

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Enthusiasm may impress some delusive image of it on the Fancy, but the real Substance must in proportion disappear, and lose its only sure hold on the minds and consciences of Men: its real Evidences being gradually disregarded, and growing out of Use, and its Credibility, in consequence of this, in time really wearing away.

This is the Natural tendency of these Principles. And just in the same proportion and manner, by contrary sentiments and pursuits, by the due improvement and discreet exercise of our Reason, the Grounds of Religion will be most effectually preserved from Decay, and the Doctrines of it from Corruption, and the Faith in Jesus Christ will, with the assistance and Grace of Almighty God, continue "always even unto the End of the World."



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